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## La Vida Skagit: The seeds of cooperation

BY MARTA MURVOSH

**Police have made changes to address needs of Latinos**

A community garden may seem an odd preoccupation for a cop, but for Mount Vernon police Officer Jon Gerondale it is just another way to bring peace and security to a neighborhood.

Educating parents about gangs, helping people prepare for the state driver's license test — and even planing a garden — are just a few things Mount Vernon police officers have done to reach out to the largely Hispanic Kulshan Creek neighborhood.

"My job is to be an advocate for the neighborhood," Gerondale said.

Seeing police officers as advocates is a challenge for many Skagitonians who hail from Mexico, where police corruption is widespread. Even law-abiding residents are more likely to see the entire legal system as something to be feared, and not as the source of help.

Statistics show that Latinos have no reason to fear police. In Mount Vernon, about 25 percent of those arrested are Hispanic. That's exactly proportional to the city as a whole, where 25 percent are Hispanic.

During the past few years, police, prosecutors, lawyers, judges and others in the Skagit County legal system have taken steps to reach out to Hispanics. But obstacles such as language, lack of knowledge of the state's laws and fear of authority — especially immigration officials — can make fairly minor problems worse.

Jaye Stover, a Spanish interpreter who works in the court system, said poverty is the root cause of one of the most common crimes: driving without insurance.

People may share one car among many and cannot afford insurance, said Stover, who works for the Language Exchange, a Burlington business that provides interpreters.

"Ninety percent of the work we do with Latinos is not violent crime, it's not drugs — it's traffic," Stover said. "And it's not accidents. It is driving without insurance."

Poverty also keeps some Latinos from exercising their full right to remain innocent until proven otherwise, said Laura Smith, a public defender who represents most indigent Spanish speakers accused of misdemeanors.

"I have clients who forgo going to trial and plead guilty because they can't afford to take time off for all the necessary hearings," said Smith, who speaks Spanish.



Frank Varga / Skagit Valley Herald  
Youngsters in the Kulshan Creek Neighborhood after-school program in Mount Vernon watch as Mount Vernon police Officer Jon Gerondale spreads dirt in a garden that has been installed for residents.

### Language and the law

The limited ability of many recent immigrants to communicate in English is

what most often complicates interaction between Hispanics and law enforcement.

"The ability of a Hispanic person to interact with the system depends in a large part on their ability to speak English," said Rob Jones, a Burlington criminal defense lawyer who speaks Spanish. "If the language barrier can be overcome, they can avoid misunderstandings."

Of the roughly 172 officers employed by the eight law enforcement agencies based in the county, about eight can converse in Spanish. Two more Spanish-speaking officers work in the Skagit County Jail.

Hispanics make up one-fourth of the populations of Burlington and Mount Vernon.

Yet none of the 21 Burlington police officers can converse in Spanish. The department has had Spanish speakers in the past, but they left for better positions, said Sgt. Guy Hanson.

The Mount Vernon Police Department has been trying since the mid-1990s to attract bilingual officers. Only two of the city's 41 officers are considered fluent and a third can carry on basic conversations.

The sheriff's department, which pays more for employees who speak another language, has four deputies who speak Spanish. Two are patrol officers and two work in the jail.

Most police agencies in the county want to hire officers who are fluent in Spanish, but they are competing against larger departments such as Seattle with bigger salaries, said Mount Vernon Police Chief Mike Barsness.

The language barrier is especially frustrating for victims who don't speak English, said Josefina Cerrillo-Ramirez, a lawyer who works with domestic violence victims for a public anti-poverty agency.

"They can't communicate with (officers)," Cerrillo-Ramirez said. "It's hard for them to tell them what happened."

That feeling is shared by law enforcement, said sheriff's deputy Kevin Sigman, who learned Spanish while in the military.

"It's hard when we are dealing with complaints and we don't know what is going on," Sigman said.

When he speaks Spanish, Sigman said he repeats questions and statements to ensure he understands.

"I'm not fluent. I think I'm proficient. If I have a problem we talk around it until I understand," Sigman said.

Occasionally Sigman has trouble pronouncing certain letter combinations or idiomatic phrases and people laugh. Others will slow down as they speak and select their words more carefully to help his understanding.

"They kind of know where your abilities lie based on your accent and the words you choose," Sigman said.

If someone has been arrested or is a witness to a crime, communication may become easier as the case gets to court.

The courts and lawyers hire interpreters from the Language Exchange of Burlington for hearings and interviews. About eight Spanish interpreters work in the local courts.



Frank Varga / Skagit Valley Herald  
Kulshan Creek Neighborhood Resource Officer Jon Gerondale explains to youngsters how to paint the concrete barriers that mark one side of a new garden that has been installed for residents.

Interpreting can be a more difficult challenge for those who hail from rural Oaxaca (wah-HOCK-ah) who speak Indian Mixteco and Tiqui. A man who speaks Tiqui and Spanish is learning to be a court translator.

Possibly the best place for a Spanish speaker who is facing criminal charges may be the office where people who cannot afford to hire a lawyer are assigned one. That's because all three employees of the county's Office of Assigned Counsel are Latinos.

About 30 percent of the office's clients speak Spanish. The office serves defendants in district, superior and Mount Vernon municipal courts.

"All three of us are bilingual, and we have to be," said Letty Alvarez, office coordinator. "There is no way our office could function without all of us being bilingual."

Language is not the only obstacle faced by those in the legal system. It can be hard for former Mexican residents to understand legal rights that Americans take for granted, such as the right to remain silent.

"I think the largest barrier isn't a communication barrier but a cultural barrier," said Sedro-Woolley police Officer Mark Wallis. "They don't have a system of law in place like we do."

Wallis, who is one of two officers in Sedro-Woolley who speaks Spanish, said he frequently encounters people who don't understand they have a constitutional right to refuse to answer police questions.

"You read the Miranda rights from that card — the ones everyone knows from TV — and they say, 'What happens if I say, I don't want to talk to you?' and I say, 'It's OK,'" Wallis said.

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#### Authority issues

Illegal immigrants encountering the criminal justice system fear that they will run afoul of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

"They are afraid if they go to court, immigration will be there and they will be arrested and deported," Alvarez said.

This fear can lead to bigger problems than a traffic ticket.

If an undocumented worker misses a court appearance after receiving a traffic ticket for driving without a license, an arrest warrant is issued.

During the next encounter with a police officer who checks a criminal database for open warrants, that person will be arrested.

Once in jail, he or she will be discovered by immigration authorities, who check the jail roster daily. Once the undocumented workers finish with the court system, they are deported.

In many cases, the problem could have been avoided if the person had simply gotten a driver's license.

Although many presume otherwise, nothing in state law requires immigrants applying for a license to prove they live in the country legally. All they need is identification.

"That's a huge issue: people can get a driver's license, they just don't know how," said Jon Gerondale, the officer for the Mount Vernon Kulshan Creek neighborhood station.

The Kulshan Creek station now offers classes in Spanish helping people pass the written driver's license test. At least 100 people have obtained licenses through the course.

"It is one of the best success stories we have," said Gerondale's boss, Police Chief Mike Barsness.

Laura Smith, from the Burlington Language Exchange business, said many of her clients are deferential to lawyers and judges. Some are inclined to do whatever they need to in order to get along and not get in trouble.

"It's a challenge to get them to understand they have rights and a greater challenge to get them to exercise them," Smith said. "To say that 'You have the right to remain silent' is almost hollow."

District Court Judge Stephen Skelton said he has had to explain to Hispanic defendants that they don't have to do what they may think he wants them to.

"They probably trust us very little for very good reasons," Skelton said. "It's hard to get over the lack of trust when we do put people in jail."

Both Skelton and his fellow District Court judge, David Svaren, said the Hispanic defendants who appear before them are much more likely to follow through with court orders than their Anglo counterparts.

"By and large most of those people had a better show rate and when they came into court, they showed respect and were wearing their best clothes," Svaren said.

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#### Growing change

In Kulshan Creek the seeds to grow a connection between police and residents were planted in 1998 when the neighborhood station opened.

Before the neighborhood station, Kulshan Creek was considered plagued by crime. Residents were afraid to leave their homes. They would see gangs and drug deals outside and occasionally hear gunshots. Police drug raids only added to the climate of fear.

"There was no connection between the police and residents," Barsness said. "They had no confidence that we could deal with their fears."

Now, residents are more willing to call police and serious crime has dropped.

"Over time we have been able to see a lot less stories that involve fear," Barsness said.

"There is no such thing as zero crime, even though that is a lofty goal," Barsness said. "When we go into a challenged neighborhood, you don't go in there and expect to eliminate crime. You go in there to bring it in line with the rest of the community."

At 14, Oscar Esquivier has lived in Kulshan Creek for 11 years and has seen the the amount of graffiti and burglaries drop off.

"Some people think it's a bad place," he said. "It's changed."

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